DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 085 CS 507 687

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TITLE Recruitment and Retention at an Urban Commuter University.
PUB DATE Nov 91
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (77th, Atlanta, GA, October 31-November 3, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College School Cooperation; *Commuter Colleges; Cultural Pluralism; *Debate; Higher Education; High Schools; *Persuasive Discourse; *Student Participation; *Student Recruitment; Urban Universities
IDENTIFIERS *University of Missouri Saint Louis

ABSTRACT

Few challenges involved in forensics coaching are as challenging as finding and maintaining qualified students in the program. Urban commuter colleges possess unique opportunities for developing broad-based, diverse forensics programs. The University of Missouri-St. Louis (UM-St. Louis) provides an example of how directors might take advantage of the urban nature of a campus. Commuter campuses offer: (1) proximity to many high school forensic programs; (2) a rich diversity of students from which to recruit a team; (3) opportunities to maintain partnerships with high schools; (4) opportunities to host major high school forensic events to publicize the colleges' programs; and (5) large numbers of new students each year. The forensics program at UM-St. Louis is based on a philosophy that combines doing the greatest good for the greatest number with cultural diversity and effective forensics pedagogy. UM-St. Louis offers advanced credit to high school forensic participants, a "bridge" program that seeks to "bridge" the gap between minority-oriented, inner city high schools and the alien college environment, and a shared resources campaign that assists high schools desiring to start forensic programs. The university also hosts high school competitions and offers its students as judges. Communication courses can provide opportunities for on-campus recruitment. While student retention in forensics poses problems, there are various ways of encouraging continued participation. Convincing students of the post-college benefits of taking part can enhance recruitment and retention. (SG)

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RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

AT AN URBAN COMMUTER UNIVERSITY

Paper Presented to the Annual Convention

of the Speech Communication Association

Atlanta, Georgia

November 1991

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RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

AT AN URBAN COMMUTER UNIVERSITY

Of all of the challenges facing those involved in the coaching of forensics, few can be at once as challenging and vexing as finding and maintaining qualified students in the program. While controversies rage over recruiting practices in all schools (e.g., Bartanen, 1988), and over retention in some (e.g., Simerly & McGee, 1991), urban commuter universities face special circumstances that by necessity shape their approaches to recruiting. Although seemingly caught in a netherworld between programs situated in the dormitory four year school and those at two-year community colleges, forensics programs at urban commuter institutions possess unique opportunities for developing a broad-based and diverse program. Such opportunities shall be the focus of the present paper.[1]

Focusing primarily on participant observation during the past seven year history of the development of the program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, this paper does not claim to provide the definitive recruitment and retention model for all commuter campuses in the urban setting to follow. However, it does provide a detailed example of how directors might take advantage of the "commuter" nature of a campus, as the essay a) outlines the opportunities afforded the director of forensics in the recruitment of students, b) describes ways in which directors can take advantage of those opportunities,

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[1]For example, several urban universities whose student populations primarily commute to class have experienced extraordinary competitive and/or pedagogical success. George Mason University, Indiana-Purdue/Indianapolis, and the University of Missouri-Kansas City provide just a few examples. Although Stovall's (1974) notion that forensics appears stronger in the suburban high schools still appears to be the case (Preston, 1989), this paper argues that the urban commuter university can still take advantage of and indeed promote greater and higher quality forensics participation through diversity grounded in a philosophy of cultural inclusion. In their discussion of the activity's future goals, Sillars and Zarefsky (1975) also noted the need for forensics to include and educate.

and c) discusses how to retain students.

Recruitment Opportunities

While lacking the advantage of having students living together in a centralized on-campus location, commuter campuses themselves offer five advantages to the director of forensics. First, they are typically located near many local high school forensic programs. In the case of UM-St. Louis, there are over 30 active high school NFL programs within a twenty-mile radius of campus. Since costs often make the public commuter campus the most economical choice for students choosing not to "go away" to college, many students with forensic experience will not only enroll at such universities by default, but will seek out a forensics program at the University and then compete. Often, students will show up at dormitory schools to offer their abilities to a program as well. Yet the number of nearby programs gives the urban commuter director more ready access to such students.

Second, the urban commuter campus typically finds itself surrounded by a rich diversity of secondary schools, and thus a rich diversity of students from which to recruit a team. In St. Louis, although as many schools do not offer forensics as the many who do, these schools, too, contribute to those who might catch on to this new activity in college. In St. Louis City and County alone, a host of various parochial, private, and public schools serve various groups, including the rich, the suburban middle class, the poor, the urban gentry, various religions, and a host of ethnic mixtures and mixtures of personalities. The general student body of the urban commuter campus reflects this mix, thereby expanding and diversifying the pool of forensic recruits.

Third, this geographical centrality to both forensic and non-forensic oriented high schools affords the urban commuter campus the opportunity to maintain various sorts of constant partnerships with high schools more than most campuses. These "pipelines" enable the commuter campus to not only publicize its program, but better serve the community.

Fourth, the location of the urban university affords it opportunities to host major high school events in order to publicize its program. Typically, enough high school forensic programs exist in the

metropolitan area that a high school tournament hosted by the college can be very successful, even if fewer than half of the programs within a few miles show up. Such a negligible travel expense for the area high schools also makes the urban commuter campus an ideal place to hold workshops and NFL district tournaments, especially given the large number of parking spaces typically available over the weekends on such campuses.

Fifth, at first glance, it would appear that since the student body lives off-campus, on-campus recruiting would be hampered. Nonetheless, on-campus recruiting should be more successful on the urban commuter campus, as each semester, a large number of new students--including the mature, non-traditional students--arrive.

Even with the advantages unique to the urban university, the director, staff, and squad members must still attract students to their program. At UM-St. Louis, we have attempted to capitalize on these unique advantages by establishing three general principles that form the philosophical underpinnings of the program. First, we seek to provide the greatest good for the greatest number of students by offering a wide variety of activities to our participants, including emphases solely on community service or on-campus activities for those students so inclined. Second, we strive to maintain a sense of diversity in the program, offering a variety of competitive and non-competitive activities that appeal to a wide variety of cultural tastes. Finally, and foremost, the philosophy of our program stresses pedagogy. While pedagogy does not have to conflict with competitive success (we tend to agree with Friedley's [1989] admonition that "learning is winning"), we do strive to produce students better able to perform, to speak, and to argue, and to do so both effectively and ethically in a multicultural society.

Capitalizing on the Opportunities

With these goals in mind, the UM-St. Louis forensics program, having gone through the trials and errors of many developing programs, has found ways of capitalizing on the advantages uniquely afforded the urban commuter university. First, realizing the proximity to many high school forensic programs, UM-St. Louis instituted the Twin Rivers High School Classic in 1990, and has been hosting

the Eastern Missouri National Forensic League District Championship Tournament since 1985. Although there are no dormitories at the University, the summer Gateway Debate Institute, begun in 1985, has now run successfully since at a very low cost to the students attending. As well, the close proximity has given UM-St. Louis students many opportunities to judge at both the weekly Greater St. Louis high school Wednesday afternoon series, and at the tournaments which occur weekly within the St. Louis area. Activities such as these afford urban commuter campuses a more constant, direct link to the active high school forensics programs than afforded the more isolated dormitory schools. Although UM-St. Louis maintains a policy of not actively recruiting students during such meets, and even though no specific recruit can be linked directly to such activity, the extraordinary exposure provided by participating in so many local events certainly does inform prospective students that the program exists, should they attend our university.

Second, the UM-St. Louis program attempts and encourages other commuter universities to capitalize on the rich diversity of forensic and non-forensic programs alike within close proximity. While some recruiting activities noted in this report target general audiences, we have found that three programs targeted at specific audiences help our program achieve its objectives: a) advanced credit, b) bridge, and c) shared resources. The advanced credit program targets schools that have advanced speech courses for high school students that might be offered for college credit. Currently, the UM-St. Louis Communication Department in cooperation with the forensics program offers two such courses--Communication 194 (practicum in forensics, offered to advanced high school juniors and seniors for competing in forensics) and Communication 40 (Usually entitled "advanced public speaking" for high schools, it transfers into the University's basic public speaking course). We target this advanced credit toward the schools that have both active forensics programs and developed speech curricula--in other words, currently schools of the suburban districts. We do caution universities considering or offering such credit--although legal in Missouri, some state and local forensic organizations ban students from competing, who are earning collegiate credit of any kind. Also, some faculty--including a small minority

on our campus--oppose any advanced credit for any high school student. We would urge such associations and opponents to abandon such rules and objections, because the advanced credit program helps not only the college program by providing exposure for direct recruitment, but aids the high school coaches (by enabling them to offer students extra incentives for speech activities) and students (by offering them more opportunity to develop the skills that come from speech and debate training, by providing them direct access to campus research facilities, and by saving them money in the long run) alike. The proximity of such schools renders it logistically feasible for the director of forensics at the urban university to handle several such programs.

By bridge, we refer to the nationally-honored Bridge Program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, in which the forensics program has participated since The Bridge Program's inception in 1987. Founded by then Chancellor Marguerite Ross Barnett (now President of the University of Houston), the Bridge Program sought to "bridge" the gap between the minority-oriented, inner-city high school student and the alien college environment. Although other universities may not offer a universal or campus-wide bridge program as does UM-St. Louis, forensics programs such as ours can often form their own "bridge" between their university and such schools. The urban setting has enabled UM-St. Louis to aid some of these schools in four areas--coaching mock trial, establishing formats for on-campus audience debates, forming a beginning debate league for junior high programs, and offering Bridge scholarships to the summer Gateway Speech and Mock Trial Institutes, which occur concurrently with the Debate Institute. Since some of these students will attend UM-St. Louis, we do recruit some to join our squad. Yet since many also have to work full-time due to financial exigencies, we exert an extra effort such that they may take advantage of the on-campus audience debates and forensic activities offered by a two-tiered program. Opportunities to assist in the summer institute, an increased departmental emphasis on cross-cultural communication, and the many audience debates required of those taking forensics practicum credit at our university enable more of these students to participate fully and remain active in the program.

By **shared resources**, we mean utilizing students from our program to volunteer to coach at area high schools desiring to start programs. Usually we depend upon the experienced, "core" members of our squad to engage in such coaching when asked. While some of the private and many of the suburban schools offer full forensics programs, and while many of the Catholic junior high schools participate in the Bellarmine speech league, nearly all of the parochial high schools lack forensic programs, despite the obvious potential. In the long run, coaching partnerships and sharing resources with such schools cannot help but enhance the image and thus the recruitment program of the urban commuter campus. Again, the close proximity of such schools makes sharing such resources possible.

Additionally, UM-St. Louis has established a number of service programs to enhance recruitment. For schools with active forensic programs, including many of the advanced credit schools, UM-St. Louis provides a list of students both on the travelling squad and participating in an on-campus capacity for high school tournament directors to contact as volunteer judges. The proximity to such high schools makes it easier for their forensics squad members to visit the major collegiate events sponsored by UM-St. Louis, thereby enabling them to come into contact with many top collegiate programs. Since the urban commuter campus usually consists of large classroom buildings in close proximity, no dorms, and plenty of parking space in an attractive "big-city" location, it often provides the ideal site for hosting nationally-oriented tournaments and attracting top schools. Last year, the Gateway Forensic Tournaments attracted 46 colleges and universities, making it the nation's third largest regular season tournament, according to Hawkins (1991). Since high school coaches are hired to judge at such events and because their students come to observe, urban commuter program may expand the recruiting exposure yet more.

Usually, commuter universities face challenges in sparking school spirit from a student population that deserts campus entirely at the end of a day. While on the surface this would tend to seem a hindrance, actually it provides another advantage to the **on-campus** recruiting program at the major urban campus. Refering to the massive student speeches made during the protest rallies of the sixties, Kleinau (1969) noted that the best opportunities for forensic recruitment are "smack in the middle of one's own

campus," among members of groups such as student councils, the Students for a Democratic Society, and Blacks for Justice (p. 16). Partly because campus activism may resurge in the 1990s, Kleinau's notion of on-campus recruitment rings doubly true for today's urban commuter university. For example, in order to address the problem of lack of spirit, during the day, such campuses often have orientations where clubs such as those involved in debate can spark interest. Also, whatever social life does exist on such campuses, often centers more in the classroom than in fraternities and dormitories. Therefore, the communication course classroom provides a uniquely excellent opportunity for the on-campus recruitment not only of recent high school graduates, but students from a wide number of traditional and non-traditional backgrounds. Such classrooms and fair activities have been a mainstay of recruiting at UM-St. Louis, for it is there that students interested in developing excellent communication skills can both seek out forensics and be sought out. Not only each year, but each semester, there have always been a large number of new students desiring to participate in the UM-St. Louis forensic program.

It must be noted that offering Communication 194, or Practicum in Forensics, both to travelling scholars and on-campus students, enhances significantly the on-campus recruiting effort. For example, the 34 students who enrolled for such credit in Winter Semester 1991 at UM-St. Louis proved indispensable not only to the on-campus speech program and hosting Novice IE Nationals, but to the competitive squad as well. We must therefore recommend that any communication department at an urban campus not only require of all of its majors that they take a large number of practicum hours, but offer forensics as one valuable way to fulfill that requirement. UM-St. Louis requires three hours, although a student can take up to a total of four. Proposals are under way to expand the total possible to eight, with students being able to earn credit for each of the semesters that they participate in the program.

In sum, the nature of the urban commuter campus not only makes the university ideal for forming myriad partnerships with area high schools for off-campus recruiting, but provides a great influx of new students each semester for on-campus recruiting. Today's trend toward students transfering during their

college careers for academic and financial reasons is magnified at the urban commuter university--a vast majority of UM-St. Louis graduates began their college careers at other universities, and less than twenty percent who enter UM-St. Louis as traditional freshmen graduate from UM-St. Louis within five years. This "water mill" of students always provides a fresh "supply" into which to "dip" for recruits constantly, affording such programs suffering from an "off" semester an opportunity to rebuild participation in the program at all levels quickly.

Retention

Whereas the situation of the major urban university favors the recruiting program, it poses challenges in terms of retention. These challenges are five-fold. First, the situation whereby all of the students leave campus during the day challenges the director to maintain a diverse and exciting program--one that motivates students to stay on campus longer (or to return in the evenings) just because of the forensic activity itself. As Kleinau (1969) noted, any program whose major goal is to win one or two tournaments may "find itself disbanding again" before long (p. 15). On a campus without major athletic events, limited social fraternity or sorority life, and no dorm life, the urban commuter program must offer much more than just competitive travel if it hopes to retain students. With goals of diversity with pedagogy in mind, UM-St. Louis has enhanced its retention by diversifying its program--by hosting audience debates, by hosting international debates with the Oxford Union Society (televised)[2], British National Team (twice since 1984), and Soviet National Team, by bringing squad members to the Speech Communication Association convention, by hosting a variety of tournaments, by selling flowers in the Student Union on Valentines Day, by holding an off-campus team retreat at the beginning of each school year, by offering an on-campus intercollegiate novice tournament for students in the basic debate course, by providing liberal tutoring opportunities at the Gateway High School Institute, by offering literary

[2]For a discussion of the value of televised debates to enhance the forensic activity, see Walsh (1969, p. 13), and for a discussion of the value of audience debates in general, see Swanson (1968, pp. 10-11).

reading hours of various sorts, by co-sponsoring Midwest Model UN, by hosting national tournaments (like Pi Kappa Delta in 1989 and the National Individual Events Tournament in 1992), and by co-sponsoring various activities with groups such as the Political Science Academy, University Programming Board, Student Government Association, Women's Center, Television Club, and sundry other departments including Communication. Each of these opportunities enhances an atmosphere whereby interdepartmental feedback (Derryberry, 1991) can benefit the forensic program.

Second, just as many students arrive each semester, students in the program leave, either through graduation (many of UM-St. Louis's most competitive performers actually arrived in the program as juniors and seniors) or though fulfilling the initial plan to start at the local commuter university, and then try the dormitory or fraternity life of an out-of-town campus after attaining two years of maturity. Unlike the first challenge to retention, this inherent difficulty cannot be handled directly--students who leave in this fashion must leave. At the same time, directors can address this revolving door in three fashions: a) make the recruiting program ongoing and constant, by establishing avenues more regular than the dormitory institution in recruiting. Again, activity fairs, classroom visitations, and a habit of seeking talent constantly within the department and recruiting at the on-campus activities can prove most successful;[3] b) when such students compete at tournaments, directors must train them quickly as they will compete against students who have been travelling the collegiate circuit for several years. Otherwise, such students may become demoralized; c) directors must put extra emphasis on variegating the difficulty in the travel schedule, especially seeking tournaments that offer novice awards and divisions, while at the same time offering divisions where students could learn quickly by examples the

[3]For example, during the 1988 visit by the Soviet Debate Team sponsored by the Speech Communication Association, Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, another urban commuter campus in the St. Louis area, handed out program flyers and distributed signup sheets that attracted several students to their debate program.

skills necessary to compete favorably on the forensics and debate circuit chosen by the director.

Third, this rapid change can play havoc if the commuter campus relies on student leadership. Thus, the director at such a program must establish a constitution that allows for student input into decision making (keeping in mind the adult nature of the student population), but one capable of ready comprehension and flexibility, ensuring a continuity of leadership. Because of the state of flux, the director must play an active role at every level of the fluid organization. In order to take advantage of the desirable tournament hosting situation, for example, the forensics club, while fluid, must remain organized at all times. The director and his or her permanent staff, therefore, must be regarded as the leaders of the program, in order to assure that some underpinning keeps the students in the program, as long as they attend the university.

Fourth, commuter campuses face uphill retention struggles even when they offer scholarships. As noted earlier, much of the fluidity results from the rapidly changing nature of the student population in general. Yet forensics faces an additional challenge in that incrementally, scholarships are perceived to aid the student less than at private institutions. It has been our experience that even though a private institution may cost more that $3,000.00 more per year than attending UM-St. Louis even after a private school awards a $600.00 per year scholarship, students will see the scholarship as "bigger" at the other school. So while the commuter campus generally charges less, its full scholarships, even assuming that they are available, amount to less because of the smaller costs. Thus, the ability to attract students by merely throwing money at them proves more limited at commuter campuses than at dormitory campuses. Although this does not deny the value of scholarships, it does speak to their limitations in terms of ensuring the personnel stability of the urban forensic program.

Fifth, maintaining the "teamness" of the squad challenges the urban director: a) unity must come from a widely varying group of students with very different views about the world, the forensic competition, and themselves; b) the fluid situation noted above can change leadership patterns quickly; and c) new members may have different competitive goals in joining the squad. To meet these demands,

the directors must thoroughly explain the rationale behind the multitiered program through detailed syllabi, must explain all expectations of those participating at various levels of the forensics activities, must explain ethical standards, and must be willing to enforce expectations and standards in order to address these issues. At the same time, the director needs to be sensitive to situations ranging from students having to dodge the bullets of gang members on the way to campus to problems stemming from the parenting of children or the management of a business operated by a nontraditional member of the squad. An ability to listen and a knowledge of the appropriate counseling services (abundant in the urban area) can help the director to manage crisis situations in a way such that the squad remains as unified as possible, despite some members occasionally missing meetings to attend to the crises afflicting modern day urban America. In the absence of a strong campus identity such as exists at most dormitory schools, UM-St. Louis has been able to promote some sense of teamness by its active involvement in the Pi Kappa Delta Forensics Fraternity. This fraternity, best suited for the urban commuter campus, offers a wide variety of events, and rewards all students for participation. Membership in this fraternity provides a vital way to promote unity and continuity in a program where both are challenged by the inherent nature of a diverse and constantly changing general student population.

Limitations and Conclusions

As noted earlier, the present study does not provide the definitive answer to recruitment and retention at the major urban commuter campus, but rather provides a glimpse at some options that the director might take in assuring the greatest benefit for the greatest number in such a situation. The experience of the successful audience debate program at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, the extraordinary NDT debate and AFA-Individual Events programs at George Mason University, the tournament-hosting success of Indiana-Purdue University at Indianapolis, and the successful CEDA program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City provide just a few examples illustrative of the many different, successful avenues that can enhance recruitment and retention at the major urban commuter university. Although the programs mentioned in this article are similar in some ways, each has chosen a

different--and successful--avenue toward recruitment and retention at the commuter campus. A comparative study of such programs could augment this study and better differentiate the recruitment and retention strategies of the four-year commuter university from the two-year community college and the four-year dormitory institution.

The present study first outlined the benefits enjoyed by the forensics program on the urban commuter campus. Second, it pointed out five ways in which the focal program has capitalized on these advantages in ways consistent with three underpinnings of the program's philosophy--doing the greatest good for the greatest number, cultural diversity, and effective and ethically sound forensics pedagogy. Third, it noted the challenges of retention, delineating those challenges that may be addressed directly from those inherent to the urban commuter campus general student body population, and ways to promote retention as well as possible under the circumstances.

Above all, forensics directors should never sell short the ability of the activity to benefit its participants once they have left college. Utilizing the notion of forensics as empowerment can become key to convincing many students on the commuter campus (mostly the first generation of their families to attend college) how they will benefit from participation. Dauber (1989) put it best when she stated:

> Because we cannot pierce the subtleties of technical argument forms we are increasingly unable to participate in policy decisions in truly meaningful ways. Thus, despite the ostensibly egalitarian nature of the public sphere, citizens are at the mercy of those who translate technical arguments for the public. Whatever else academic debate teaches (and I would argue it teaches a great deal) it empowers our students and ourselves, in that it proves to them they ought not be intimidated by the rhetoric of expertise surrounding questions of policy. They know that they are capable of making and defending informed choices about complex issues outside of their own area of interest because they do so on a daily basis (p. 206).

The realization of such empowerment, along with knowing the social, educational, and competitive benefits of forensics, cannot help but enhance recruitment and retention at our major urban campuses.

Even as we have listed many ways to recruit and retain students on the commuter campus, as on any campus, there is no substitute for running a program generally capable of empowering its students for future life.

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